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ABSTRACT

This essay proposes instances of how Anglophone popular culture can offer a place for nurturing critical encounters in the context of learning English. It delineates the theoretical bases that reveal popular culture as a fundamental indicator of society and, using Anglophone movies and stories, analyzes the pedagogical possibilities for stimulating appreciative and self-reflexive responses in students on the path to transcultural Hispanic-Anglo understanding. It also emphasizes the radical potential of popular culture for evaluating the preoccupations of contemporary society. In order to understand a foreign culture, one must see it from the viewpoint of that milieu. This "outsideness" provides a creative understanding of the foreign culture. Two recent films of the African American, Spike Lee, "Do the Right Thing" and "Jungle Fever," uncover the hostility among urban ethnic/racial groups. The first film makes viewers wonder if something analogous could happen in Mexico, and what would be the reaction of the government and society. The second film can stimulate discussion on the pressures in Mexico to establish relationships circumscribed within one's own social class. Stories and other films reveal other realities in popular culture. Final comments advocate a transcultural agenda in Mexican universities that is constantly updated. (Contains 35 references.) (CK)

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Anglophone Popular Culture

in the Mexican University English Curriculum[1]

> Differences are what define the edges of cultures and give them shape. Differences in the textures and colors of cultures do exist and they make the world richer. It could be argued that if there are no mysteries to be uncovered, no new perspectives to stretch our minds and broaden our philosophies, it is pointless to study a foreign language. In the foreign language class we can be aggressively affirmative about differences; we need not be apologetic. . . . We can convey the idea to our students that differences delight, not diminish. (Morain 408)

For several years now throughout the world, the social sciences and humanities have been engaged in intense debates concerning new epistemological and methodological paradigms. In contrast, the college teaching of English in Mexico has remained relatively untouched by any opening or discussion of radical or dynamic change, thereby manifesting itself as a hallmark of the intellectual status quo for more than thirty years.[2] There, the majority of students as a graduation requirement enroll in reading comprehension programs in foreign languages (L2), the content being texts specific to the given majors. In the case of English, these programs are known as English for Specific or Academic Purposes (ESP/EAP). Thus, students are being prepared for their insertion in the work force and tough professional

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[1] This paper was delivered at the Popular Culture Association's Annual Conference in New Orleans, Louisiana in April 1993.

[2] Although there have been new approaches, these tend toward a methodological nature and not of content. My remarks in this paper pertain to those English programs for non-majors (which comprise the greater part of university English curricula in Mexico) and not bachelor degree programs in English.

competition. If a student wishes a four skills general language course, he or she normally relies on any of the numerous language schools that abound in developing countries like Mexico.[3] However, at this moment we find ourselves in Mexico at an international conjuncture, where economical and cultural borders are being drastically redefined and are affecting diverse human groups, ideas and behaviors that flow, collide, and interlock to the point that even our homes are immersed in global communication and information networks. Before this perspective it is opportune and absolutely necessary to rescue a rather fossilized college English curriculum with the purpose of upgrading it so it may contribute to the formation of graduates in Mexico as transcultural literates, capable of confronting other cultures critically and simultaneously appreciating their own culture.[4] We would thus be working toward the end of irrational, chauvinistic policies of "inverse discrimination" toward foreign cultures, and also be enriching a curriculum that has been dominated by the technocratic "metanarrative" of English for Specific Purposes.[5] I propose in this essay instances and

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[3] There are Mexican universities that offer four skills programs similar to language institutes; what is lacking in both is a critical focus and understanding of the foreign culture component.

[4] For more extensive critiques of the foreign language and general university curriculum in Mexico, see Lee Zoreda, "Dialogismo" and "Ciencia ficción"; Lee Zoreda and Zoreda Lozano, "Science Fiction" and "Educación".

[5] For a clear and concise argument about the necessity to open all levels of education to postmodernity (the need to end "metanarratives", the problems of the "other", the development of

concrete suggestions of how Anglophone popular culture can offer a place for nurturing critical encounters in the context of learning the English language.[6] First, I will delineate the theoretical bases that reveal popular culture as a fundamental indicator of society, thus confirming its inclusion as one of the possible contents of these courses. Afterwards, through a selection of Anglophone contemporary movies and short stories, I will analyze the pedagogical possibilities for stimulating appreciative and self-reflexive responses in students on the path to transcultural hispanic-anglo understanding.

The Relevance of Popular Culture

The postmodern tendency toward the fusion of spheres once well separated, that is, "de-differentiation" (Rust 622) has provoked a reassessment of popular culture in relation to elitist or canonical culture. Nevertheless, we come across as many definitions of popular culture as there are researchers. In its mission statement, the Popular Culture Assocation of the United States defines it as "the culture which most people---for good or ill---enjoy: literature and art, materials, patterns and expressions; mass media genres and all other phenomena of

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information societies through technology, and the art and aesthetic of daily popular culture), see Rust.

[6] Although my examples will treat exclusively with American culture, an optimum program in the English language and Anglophone culture(s) would have to include the cultures of Canada, the English-speaking Caribbean countries, the United Kingdom, certain African countries, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, among others.

everyday life" ("Call for Papers"). Likewise, Hinds finds "popularity" the key factor in any defintion: "those aspects of culture, whether ideological, social, or material, which are widely spread and believed in and/or consumed by significant numbers of people..." (210). For John Fiske, popular culture is made by "the various formations of the people at the interface between the products of capitalism and everyday life", thereby creating an excess of such products that consequently shapes a popular discrimination (103). At least in the industrialized (and post-industrialized) societies there exist interrelationships between popular culture and mass communication (Fuller 137) that can lead one to conclude that all culture is mass culture under such conditions (Denning 258).

Today many of those who study popular culture reject the scorn that some members of the Frankfurt School had expressed toward popular/mass culture. On the contrary, following Walter Benjamin, they observe that popular art, like the movies, has the capacity to free us from our "prison-world" ("Work" 236) through a "heightened presence of mind" (238) of our daily life, making us conscious of its injustices; the popular art of mass communication stops being based on ritual like traditional art to become grounded in politics (224). Fiske shares with Benjamin the affirmation that the challenge of popular art lies in its social and not aesthetic foundations (110), and in the capacity of the human being to become an "expert" o "author" in the realm of popular art:

> ...one of the defining characteristics of texts in the popular domain is that they should be treated as unfinished and inadequate in themselves: they are "completed" only by the productivity of popular readers and by their relevant insertion into readers' everyday lives. (108)

Furthermore, it is well known the opinion of Gramsci on popular culture's role and strength. For example, he considered that utopian novels (forerunners of science fiction) revealed the most felt aspirations of even the most subjugated classes ("Cultural Writings" 238). And, on mass or commercial literature he tells us:

> ...commercial literature has enormous value precisely...because the success of a work of commercial literature indicates (and it is often the only indication available) the 'philosophy of the age', that is, the mass of feelings and conceptions of the world predominant among the 'silent' majority. ("Cultural Writings" 348)

Bakhtin, in his own way, reworks this praise of popular culture. In it and its maximum expression---the carnivalesque, there is a subversive, emancipatory and centrifugal power that struggles to undermine the hegemonic, centripetal discourse ("Dialogical" 272-273). According to him, our daily life is charged with vitality and meaning:

> ...the everyday is a sphere of constant activity, the source of all social change and individual creativity. The prosaic is the truly interesting and the ordinary is what is truly noteworthy. (Morson and Emerson 23)

Therefore, the contemporary vision of popular culture is that of "a contested terrain...[that] provides access to a society's dreams and nightmares..." (Kellner 141). If we believe that each culture discloses its particular "structures of

feeling" that permeate its society (Williams 128-135), our task as professors and researchers of English as a Foreign Language (and Culture) is to confront and expose "against the grain" (Benjamin, "Theses" 257) those cultural artifacts, elucidating the "dominant code, the subordinant codes and the oppositional codes in their dynamic interplay" (Real 152) of the society (ies) under study. Thus, with a critical examination of the popular culture manifestations of a foreign society (that is, the sample par excellence of its most lived "structures of feeling"), we can help develop in our students an apprecation of the complexity of that culture, with all its coherences and contradictions, in order to free them from erroneous fantasies.

Toward a Creative Understanding of Anglophone Popular Culture

I have emphasized the radical potential of popular culture for becoming acquainted with and evaluating the preoccupations and daily vicissitudes of contemporary society. It should be pointed out that, in the case of Anglophone culture, it is precisely its popular texts---movies, music, television, sports, and literary genres (e.g. science fiction, detective, horror, espionage)---that tend to attract college students in Mexico. As these foreign texts are "deconstructed", it affords us an ideal opportunity[7] to help students begin the critical process of

[7] In foreign language teaching, the selection of materials according to student interest (Collie and Slater 6) and previous knowledge of narrative-cultural themes and schemas of the foreign language/culture (Swaffer 125-126; Carrell, "View" and "Evidence") are important factors for the learning process.

discovering and questioning their own identities, preferences and subjectivities. Perhaps then, as teachers, we would be acting as cultural anthropologists, serving as a Vygotskian scaffold (Bruner 24-25) for our students to read and interpret the foreign text from "over the shoulders of the natives" (Geertz in Real 148) until they themselves become "anthropologists".

Again, I insist that it is neither sufficient nor desirable to only identify the "structures of feeling" that come about in encounters with foreign popular culture. Remembering Bakhtin, we note that his work emphasized the need of a "creative understanding", that is, dialogical, of all that is foreign, whether words, objects, persons or cultures. For this kind of understanding, we must first view what we are examining from the viewpoint of the author and his or her era; afterwards we pass to an understanding immersed in our present day, distanced and foreign from the author (Bakhtin, "Speech Genres" 144). This "outsideness" provides us with a creative understanding of the foreign culture, never seeking a fusion or superimposition of it with our own culture:

> Such a dialogic encounter of two cultures does not result in merging or mixing. Each retains its own unity and <u>open</u> totality, but they are mutually enriched. (Bakhtin, "Speech Genres" 7)

As a consequence, in the act of creative understanding, foreign words (or cultures) become both one's own/foreign or foreign/one's own words (or cultures), with the object of our comprehension converting into <u>subject</u> ("Speech Genres" 145). Bakhtin maintains that whoever understands creatively,

participates in the authorship of the text (or culture), completing it with his or her understanding and co-creativity. Moreover, we have to risk that such a transaction may bring about our own transformation:

> The person who understands must not reject the possibility of changing or even abandoning his already prepared viewpoints and positions. In the act of understanding, a struggle occurs that results in mutual change and enrichment. (Bakhtin, "Speech Genres" 142)

What Bakhtin proposes is nothing less than what is termed in pedagogy "critical thinking" and has direct applications in fostering creative understanding of Anglophone culture in college English courses in Mexico. I would like to continue now with some examples---a "micronarrative"---from courses using Anglophone film and science fiction at the Universidad Autonoma Metropolitana in Mexico City.[8] I wish to demonstrate that, on evaluating and appreciating "against the grain" these cultural texts, previously considered insignificant, or "prosaic" aspects can lead students toward dialogical cultural encounters.

Two recent films of the African American, Spike Lee, "Do the Right Thing" and "Jungle Fever", uncover the hostility among urban ethnic/racial groups, and the myth of the United States as a "melting pot". The first movie narrates one day in a New York City black neighborhood that ends much like Los Angeles in April of 1992, in racial confrontations, including the destruction of

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[8] As always, I wish to thank my students for their suggestive discussions, and, therefore, for their contributions in the following section of this paper; to paraphrase Bakhtin, "...I hear [their] voices in everything..." (Bakhtin, "Speech Genres" 169).

the local pizzeria owned by an Italian American. It makes us wonder if something analogous could happen in Mexico, changing the roles of the marginalized and restraurant owner, and what would be the reaction of the government (and society) in such a situation. The other film concerns itself with the problems that arise when a young African American architect and his Italian American secretary have a love affair. This can stimulate discussions on the pressures in Mexico to establish relationships circumscribed within one's own social class, and the subtle fixation (within this context) on who appears more mestizo (brown, Indian) or more criollo (white, European). In other words, one can examine in depth if the equivalent of a certain racism does exist in Mexico.

The low budget picture, "Breaking Away" was filmed on the campus of Indiana State University at Bloomington; it describes the summer after high school graduation of a group of working class adolescents and their conflicts with college students. One aspect that stands out in this movie is the difference between American and Mexican undergraduate life. In the States the campus resembles a golf course, the students can opt to live in dormitories or fraternities and sororities, and, in general, contrary to Mexican custom, the university assumes the responsibility of the parents during the students' stay. Various scenes take place in the student union, a building where students can comfortably rest, equipped with cafeterias, T.V, rooms, meeting and conversational areas and other features. The

reaction of Mexican college students to these American "comforts" is, first of all, envy, and self-criticism, as buildings of that kind in Mexico might not be taken care of, becoming garbage dumps and under the control of certain student groups that would monopolize its use; in other words, the union would cease to be a place of rest and leisure for the entire community. Another observation among Mexican students is that the Mexican college student on the whole behaves and is treated as an adult, while his or her American counterpart is considered to be to a certain extent a glorified high school student.

"Roger and Me" could be the sequel that describes the fates, ten years afterwards, of the blue-collar class described in "Breaking Away". It is a documentary narrated and "starring" its own director, writer, and producer, Michael Moore. It demonstrates in rich detail the devastating effects on the workers of his hometown of Flint, Michigan that the closing of the main source of jobs, the General Motors plant, has caused. In reality the film is but one of numerous "narratives" that have occurred in the so-called de-industrialized Rust Belt in recent years. Viewing this movie, the Mexican student has the opportunity to consider the situation and attitudes of the American working class, even perhaps its point of view regarding the controversial NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement). At the same time, the social insensitivity and amorality of corporate executives toward closing sole job sources and moving them to more profitable regions brings us to ponder that the same

plants that are presently arriving in Mexico could also easily leave for Panama or Cuba according to the laws of the market. In other words, Hermosillo or Ciudad Juárez could become a Mexican Flint, Michigan.

The dystopic universe of Los Angeles at the beginning of the twenty-first century in the film, "Blade Runner" (1982), reflects the urban fears of the industrialized countries (including the Anglos of Los Angeles): those who do not succeed in fleeing to the suburbs will be condemned to a world of perpetual environmental pollution, living with a heteroglot, mixed ethnic population of inferiors (non-white), communicating in a polyglot bastard dialect, and in areas without differentiation between the public and the private. Some of us in Mexico City already are living parts of this futuristic vision, especially in low income neighborhoods and downtown. Those who control the population of "losers" in the picture inhabit the highest, sunniest zones of the city, reminding us of the privileged classes in Mexico City who live in residential areas or "heights". Also, one of the themes in "Blade Runner"---the political and ethical consequences of categorizing and labelling a population---has provoked discussion, among other observations, on the Mexican university policy of identifying all foreign students as such on their student identification card.

Let us turn to some examples of Anglophone science fiction, a genre that happily has been able to go beyond the separate boundaries of popular culture, philosophy, fantasy, science, and

social criticism. The feminist story "When It Changed" (Russ) describes a planet with a society developed and inhabited only by females at the moment when earthmen come searching for women in order to populate Earth. It is an interesting sample of lesbian literature, where men are characterized as the aliens; we the readers see them as such from the perspective of the lesbian women. This can indisputably be a rare experience, especially for the male student to become acquainted with what has been the traditional female role: to be the object of "the gaze".

Another writer, James Tiptree, Jr., (alias Alice Sheldon) takes on the perspective of a typical Anglo macho who becomes shipwrecked off the coast of Yucatán in "The Women Men Don't See"; there she exposes the stereotyped attitudes of the Anglo-Saxon male toward the Anglo-Saxon female, and toward the Latino male and female. In his relationship with the Mayan pilot, the principal character (and narrator) reveals his sexual insecurity toward the ethnic "other". The narrative ends with the Anglo-Saxon mother and daughter escaping from the scene with extraterrestrials, recognizing that, for a woman, the true aliens are white Anglo-Saxon American males. Thus, from this piece we have a variety of commentaries that arise about the Anglo-Saxon perspective toward Latin Americans, and vice versa: the sometimes stereotyped attitudes of Latin Americans toward Anglo-Saxon men and women.

Ursula Le Guin qualifies her short story, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas", as a psychomyth on the figure of the

scapegoat. She gives us a portrait of a bucolic and perfect utopian society of great beauty, so preserved in exchange for the horrible mistreatment and imprisonment of a child. Some of the inhabitants of Omelas, being unable to bear such a condition, make a decision of conscience and abandon the city. Some students have interpreted the story as reflecting the sense of guilt that industrialized nations have of the underdeveloped ones, that is, those who live in abundance and excess while others lack the bare necessities. In addition, they have remarked that the suffering of the oppressed and marginalized in any country, including Mexico, seems to be the ignoble vestiges of the advancement and development of privileged sectors of the same country. The famous words of Walter Benjamin resound in this text: "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" ("Theses" 256).

Final Comments

I have tried in this essay to argue the case for widening the Mexican college English curriculum to include the critical study of foreign cultures, in this case Anglophone popular culture(s). I proposed, among other alternatives, the selection of popular culture texts to help provide spaces where the student population can evaluate and demythologize Anglophone cultures in all their dimensions, and, simultaneously, develop an emancipatory self-reflexion that would foster the demythologization of their native culture. If we believe that in

order to defend themselves in an interconnected and interdependent world, Mexican graduates need to be transcultural professionals in addition to being experts in their own technical fields, the teaching and teachers of English would have to undergo a radical change. Instead of restricting the usual course content to only reading comprehension of specialized texts (ESP), which is only a small part of the content recognized internationally in a foreign language curriculum, Mexican programs ought to include the history, politics, economic systems, philosophies and religion, aesthetic manifestations and popular culture of Anglophone countries.[9] Instead of trusting outdated teaching manuals with a "safe" and eternal content, the English language and Anglophone culture(s) professor would have to constantly update him or herself in the culture of his or her speciality (as is expected in other disciplines). He or she would have to develop transdisciplinary perspectives and curiosity instead of preferences for methodological "recipes". In other words, he or she would be a <u>professor</u> of the English language and Anglophone cultures, and not merely a language <u>instructor</u>. Undeniably this implies a great effort; nevertheless, it could be a virtual liberation for both professor and students. If we agree with Gramschi that the present tendency, as in his time, toward the proliferation of technical education is nothing but the perpetuation of traditional social

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[9] For an indication of the radical changes that are transforming foreign language departments in the U.S. toward internationalization, see Peck; Zipser; McConeghy.

differences, then let us affirm his statement of the purpose of all educational endeavor, including English programs: "[the formation of] a person capable of thinking, studying and ruling ---or controlling those who rule" ("Prison Notebooks" 40).

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